DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 214 233 EA 014 448

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TITLE You Can't Afford for Teachers to Be Out, So Take These Steps Now to Stop Absenteeism.
INSTITUTION National School Boards Association, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE Mar 82
NOTE 6p.
JOURNAL CIT Updating School Board Policies; v13 n3 p1-4 Mar 1982

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Attitudes; Administrator Role; *Board of Education Policy; Elementary Secondary Education; Institutional Characteristics; *Leaves of Absence; *Teacher Attendance; Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Characteristics
IDENTIFIERS *Absenteeism (Employee)

ABSTRACT

Teacher absenteeism is a growing problem, according to this short guide on reducing absenteeism. The author briefly reviews the research data on absenteeism from national, state, and district sources. She lists the average costs of teacher substitution by district size and the characteristics of both districts and teachers with bad absence records. She then discusses the "absentee culture," identified and described by researchers on U.S. society, and outlines symptoms of the absentee culture at the board and administrative levels and among teachers and staff. To handle absenteeism and the absentee culture, the author suggests 17 strategies for school boards, central district offices, principals, and supervisors. Among the strategies are incentives for good attendance, unlimited sick leave accumulation, attendance requirements for tenure, centralized absence records, publication of attendance data, investigation of chronic absenteeism, and requirements that teachers asking for sick leave call the principal or supervisor personally. (RW)

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UPDATING SCHOOL BOARD POLICIES

A Component of the EDUCATIONAL POLICIES SERVICE

Volume 13 / Number 3 / March 1982

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You can't afford for teachers to be out, so take these steps now to stop absenteeism

By T. Susan Hill

When the Youngstown, Ohio, school board looked at its preliminary budget figures last year and saw $350,000 allotted for substitute teacher salaries, it decided something was wrong. Was sick leave being misused? the board wondered. Before long, a private detective agency, hired by the board, began to tail teachers who called in sick. The result: Almost immediately, one teacher received a five-day suspension for abuse of the district's sick leave policy.

Absence rates on incline

Although the Youngstown board's method for tackling its problem appears unique, the problem itself—a steady growth in staff absenteeism—is not. Across the nation, school districts are reporting such a sharp rise in absenteeism (five percent in each of the past 16 years) that some observers call the phenomenon "a disease approaching epidemic proportions." The national figures substantiate their claim: Each day, nearly 200,000 teachers call in sick, resulting in an annual loss of 75 million hours of contact time with students and costing school boards collectively about $2 billion each year.

"What this means for school administrators," says Paul H. Gendler, former district administrator in Merrick, N.Y., "is that each day starts with an unpleasant juggling act. We have to determine who's out, who can substitute, and what it all will cost."

A bane to quality education

"Absenteeism socks districts a double whammy," says another administrator. "We end up paying twice to have a teacher in each classroom—once for the regular teacher and again for the substitute." Researchers might upgrade the problem to a triple whammy, as they have found school boards don't get much for these twice-bought services. Regular teachers, they say, are somewhere from six to 20 times more effective than their substitutes.

Says one Ohio administrator: "Teacher absenteeism creates a tremendous financial leakage which makes schooling more expensive while reducing instructional effectiveness."

Professionalism questioned

Teacher absenteeism, most observers agree, is a symptom of deeper problems in the public schools. Although some districts seem immune to the absenteeism epidemic, more feel they've lost the natural immunity of "professionalism" that teachers used to bring to their jobs. Indeed, several studies of public school absence rates reveal that those rates, as high as 8.5 percent in some urban districts, exceed those of private industry (about four percent).

Research data, however, are sketchy and not up to date. The National Education Association contends that much research fails to differentiate among types of leave, and questions whether many school districts have proof that most teachers have done anything other than use leave they have been granted.

"The majority of employee absences are for legitimate personal or family illnesses," agrees the Ohio Association of School Personnel Administrators (OASPA), which recently published a report on the subject. "However, this fact must be juxtaposed with the fact that absence rates are increasing each year." Or, as studies in New Jersey and New York City concluded, the more days school boards allow, the more days teachers take.

Signs of an 'absentee culture'

Why? The Educational Research Service (ERS), in its exhaustive 1980 summary of research on employee absenteeism, sheds some light on the question, first by noting the difference between "absence" and "absenteeism." Quoting *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language*, the ERS report defined *absence* as "a state of

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What substitute teachers cost

Does your school district spend more than it should on substitute teachers? The chart below shows what other districts spend. The information isn't the latest (1977), but it's the most recent available. It comes from the Educational Research Service.

District size	Cost of substitutes
25,000 students	$486,955
10,000 to 24,999	138,430
2,500 to 9,999	48,526
300 to 2,499	10,590

These figures account for about 1.6 percent of the total amount a district budgets for all teacher salaries. They do not include the cost of paying regular teachers for sick days. ■

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Absenteeism

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being away or not present," and *absenteeism* as "absence from duty, work, or station; especially, such absence when deliberate or habitual." It is absenteeism from which schools suffer, according to ERS research, and this is in great part due to what researchers called the "absentee culture" in American society.

In school districts, the absentee culture manifests itself as a pervasive expectation that teachers and support staff may, will, and should use up allotted leave. According to James Lewis, Jr., executive director of a regional New Jersey education service center, school districts cannot save themselves from the absenteeism epidemic until they diagnose how severely this expectation has invaded the minds of board members, administrators, teachers, and other staff. He suggests looking for these symptoms:

• *At the board level.* The board does not even recognize the increase in staff absences as a problem, or finds itself postponing action because "more pressing" problems demand its attention. The board's policy on staff, if there is one, only lists how many days' leave staff may take for specific reasons and what punitive measures will be taken if that number is exceeded. The board does not actively encourage good attendance through any program of incentives or recognition. Good attendance, after all, is what teachers are paid for, the board believes.

• *At the administrative level.* Attendance records, if they are maintained, are incomplete. If they *are* complete, the records are used only to keep track of leave days each staff member has coming. They are not used to monitor patterns of absenteeism with an eye to improving attendance. Administrators believe it's too hard, in any case, to separate legitimate from illegitimate absences; and that teachers *deserve* "sick" days to overcome burnout.

• *Among teachers and support staff.* There is a creeping legitimacy to the notion that staff may decide for themselves whether they have just cause for using sick leave for other than personal or family illness. A 1977 study by *Instructor Magazine*, for instance, found that 35 percent of the teachers surveyed had called in sick because they felt tired or under stress.

Support from the top

From top to bottom, no one cares about good attendance in districts that have succumbed to the absentee culture. To improve attendance, it stands to reason that the converse must be true: Everyone must care. According to an American Management Association study on improving attendance, it is "reasonable" to expect employees to miss only three percent of their work time; a two percent absence rate is "attainable." School districts that have approached these rates have one thing in common: A comprehensive plan that gives everyone in the school system specific responsibilities for curtailing unnecessary absences.

"Relying on a single strategy is inadvisable," cautions Woodbury, N.J., Assistant Superintendent R. Craig Barry. He recommends that several different strategies be incorporated into a comprehensive attendance improvement plan. Each should have these three elements: (1) employees must think the strategy reasonable; (2) the board should not have to spend much money, nor the administration much time; and (3) each should have the potential to succeed.

Research reveals numerous strategies that meet Barry's three criteria. They fall easily into two categories: strategies that reward good attendance, and strategies that eliminate opportunity for misuse of sick leave. Both types appear in the sample comprehensive plan below.

SCHOOL BOARD STRATEGIES. If absence rates are to drop, the board must lead the way. New policies that encourage attendance and discourage absenteeism must be developed in cooperation with teachers and support staff. Here are several policy provisions that boards have found effective:

• *Offer incentives for good or perfect attendance.* An ERS survey found that only eight percent of all districts do this, and each benefited. Some incentives cost next to nothing: The Woodbury, N.J., board allows the teacher with the best attendance record each month, in each school, to leave school early one day in the next month; also, the school with the best monthly record may dismiss all teachers early one day. Simple letters of recognition are effective in other districts.

Other incentives have price tags: bonus pay, recognition dinners, paid tuition for professional improvement, partial or full payment of accumulated sick leave as severance pay, or conversion of sick leave to vacation or personal days.

"Whatever the board can afford, do it," say management consultants. They note that 50 years of personnel studies show that recognition, not salary, is the prime motivator of employees.

• *Allow unlimited accumulation of sick leave days.* This will assure employees that they don't have to "use them or lose them." The first school board to do this (Bristol, R.I., in 1926) recorded the lowest rate of teacher absenteeism in the country.

UPDATING SCHOOL BOARD POLICIES is provided automatically each month to every board member and to the central offices of school districts subscribing to the Educational Policies Service of the National School Boards Association's School District Management Services Department. Subscribers may request sample policies referred to in articles from the EPS Policy Information Clearinghouse at NSBA offices, 1055 Thomas Jefferson Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20007.

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• *Require investigation of attendance records of job applicants.* If, in past jobs, excessive absence was a problem, it may well be again.

• *Make good attendance a requisite for tenure.* "Consistent attendance became an important factor for continuing a beginning teacher beyond the trial period," says former Merrick, N.Y., District Administrator Paul Gendler. In recommending that his board adopt this and other policies, Gendler helped Merrick cut its teacher absences by 55 percent in one year.

• *Add appraisal of attendance to regular staff evaluations.* The Merrick board did this, too. "Punctuality and attendance may seem secondary to the quality of teaching performance," says Gendler, "but they're vital concerns."

• *Require that substitutes get briefed.* Legitimate absences will always take regular teachers from classrooms, but ask them to leave their lesson plans behind. The effectiveness of substitute teachers is at stake.

• *Reserve the right to request documentation of illness.* Says a Massachusetts committee (board) member and physician: "Sick leave is a benefit no one wants to deny employees but, from both of my positions, I know it is abused." His board requires specific medical evidence of illness when an employee is absent five or more days.

CENTRAL OFFICE RESPONSIBILITIES. Someone, like the personnel director, needs to be placed in charge of coordinating administration of the board's policies. His duties should include:

• *Maintaining central records of district-wide attendance.* In these records will lie the evidence of the effectiveness of the board's policies.

• *Publishing district attendance data in newsletters.* Making public these data—the number of days absent, the reasons for absence, the availability and cost of substitutes, patterns of absence—can have a sobering effect on would-be abusers.

• *Publishing a handbook of leave policies and procedures.*

• *Providing orientation for new staff, in-service for old.*

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SHORTS FROM THE COURTS

With the Supreme Court back in session, there's much to report. Here's what the high court says about:

USE OF SCHOOL FACILITIES BY STUDENT RELIGIOUS GROUPS. In two separate cases, the Supreme Court has said that, while colleges may not *ban* student religious groups from meeting in school facilities, high school officials may not *permit* the same. The seemingly contradictory rulings were justified on the basis of student age.

In *Widmar v. Vincent*, college-aged students successfully challenged the University of Missouri's policy of opening school facilities to all student groups except those with a religious purpose. The university argued that its policy prevented it from unconstitutional support of religion; students argued that the policy opened school facilities for student use and then excluded some groups because of the content of their speech. Their right to free speech was thus censored, students said, and the court agreed.

The high court declined to hear the case involving high school students, letting stand a federal appeals court ruling in *Brandon v. Board of Education.* In *Brandon*, students challenged a Guilderland, N.Y., school board policy similar to that of the University of Missouri, and challenged it on the same grounds. The 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals rejected their suit, ruling that high school students were at an "impressionable" age, that they might not understand the voluntary nature of student religious meetings. They might think instead, said the appeals court, "that the state has placed its imprimatur on a particular religious creed. This symbolic inference is too dangerous to permit." (EPS file reference: COMMUNITY USE OF SCHOOL FACILITIES, code KG)

VOLUNTARY STUDENT PRAYERS AT ASSEMBLIES. The high court also let stand a 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruling involving religion in public schools. In *Chandler Unified School District v. Collins*, the appeals court found that district policy permitting students to organize voluntary prayers at the start of school assemblies violated the First Amendment's prohibition against public support of religion. Students who did not wish to participate in prayers would miss a major school function, the court added. School officials lost their argument that their policy merely offered "benign accommodation," not active support, of student religious activities. (EPS file references: ASSEMBLIES, code INE; TEACHING ABOUT RELIGION, code IGAC)

TITLE IX'S BAN ON SEX DISCRIMINATION. The Supreme Court, in declining to review yet another appellate court ruling, has supported the lower court's finding that Title IX only prohibits *intentional* sex discrimination by schools and colleges.

The 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, in *Cannon v. University of Chicago*, found no basis to the claim of would-be medical student Geraldine Cannon that two universities had intentionally denied her admission because of her sex. The schools' policies discouraged or barred applications from people over age 35 if they lacked advanced degrees. Cannon's attorney argued unsuccessfully that the policy had an adverse impact on women, since it did not take into account that women traditionally are more likely than men to interrupt their education to rear children or support a spouse at school. An adverse impact does not imply discriminatory intent, much less prove it, the court said—much to the dismay of civil rights advocates. (EPS file reference: EQUAL EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES, code JB) ■

Districts, teachers with worst absence records

Staff absenteeism can be reduced, but the task may be harder for some districts than others. From data gathered by the Educational Research Service, here are profiles of districts and teachers with the worst attendance records—plus two lists of other factors that do or do not affect attendance:

Characteristics of districts with the highest absence rates

— Located in the Northeast (9 days per teacher per year, compared to national average of 8 days)
— Enroll more than 25,000 students (more than 9 days per teacher per year, compared to 6.5 days in districts with fewer than 2,500 students)
— Located in urban area (2 days more per teacher per year than in suburban districts)
— Bargain with teachers (1 day more per teacher per year than in districts that don't negotiate)
— Don't require teachers to speak to immediate supervisor when they call in sick (2 days per teacher per year)

(Note: Support staff also have higher absence rates in school districts with these characteristics, although support staff average 2.5 fewer days out per year than teachers.)

Characteristics of teachers with the highest absence rate

— Earn more than $17,000 per year (2 more days out per year than those who earn under $13,000)
— Are female (married women take more days than single women, but married men take fewer)
— Live a long distance from school
— Teach in elementary schools (more absences than among high school teachers)
— Teach disadvantaged students, especially in inner city schools

Other factors that affect attendance

— Day of week (more absences fall on Monday, Friday, or days preceding or following legal holidays than on any other days)
— Time of year (more absences fall in winter and spring months than at the start of the school year)

Factors that do not seem to affect attendance

— Amount of professional training
— Years of experience
— Degree of autonomy in job
— Degree to which employer permits participation in management decisions
— Degree of satisfaction with salary or promotional opportunities
— Degree of satisfaction with co-workers

Sources: *Teacher Absenteeism: Experience and Practices of School Systems; Support Staff Absenteeism: Experience and Practices of School Systems;* and *Employee Absenteeism: A Summary of Research;* all published by the Educational Research Service, 1800 N. Kent St., Arlington, VA 22209. Respective prices: $24, $22, $20. ■

Absenteeism

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• *Investigating cases of chronic abuse reported by principals.*

TASKS FOR PRINCIPALS, SUPERVISORS. "The single most critical factor to the success of any attendance improvement program is the support of each employee's immediate supervisor," concluded the study on teacher absenteeism by OASPA. Other studies echo that the principal is the key person in relating to teachers the board's determination to eliminate sick leave abuse. The board that wants to stop abuse will ask principals to:

• *Require teachers to call them personally to report illness.*
• *Require teachers to give principals, in person, an explanation of their absence upon return to duty.*
• *Document attendance of all building staff.*
• *Monitor attendance records for patterns.*
• *Develop procedures for dealing with excessive absences, including counseling, warning letters, or referral to the central office.*

• • •

Support from the top. Strong central office coordination. Firm on-site management. These are a school board's best defense against the absenteeism epidemic. To become "absence resistant," school boards must first get their policy houses in order. ■

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